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SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PTER](#) [PREL](#) [KISL](#) [IN](#) [BG](#) [PK](#)

SUBJECT: WEST BENGAL FRETS OVER ALLEGED ISI CONTAGION

Classified By: Charge Robert O. Blake Jr. for Reasons 1.4 (B, D)

¶1. (C) A two day visit to Calcutta revealed surprisingly deep anxiety over the presence in West Bengal of terrorist cells and radical Islamist groups allegedly linked to Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). The starker message during PolCouns' August 1-2 visit came from Home Secretary Prasad Ranjan Ray, who claimed that the state government is seeing a systematic effort by ISI to establish terrorist cells and foster Islamic radicalism using a string of Wahabi influenced madrassas along the Bangladesh border. Pressed on the relative absence of terrorist attacks in West Bengal compared to other parts of India, Ray attributed this to the fact that ISI's plan was not yet complete, suggesting it was just a matter of time before the impact is felt.

¶2. (C) The forcefulness of this message from the West Bengal government was made more striking by the number of times we heard the same concern from across the state's political spectrum. Congress politicians, journalists and liberal Muslims joined in expressing fear that ISI has begun a systematic effort to radicalize West Bengal's large Muslim population (estimated 30%). Interestingly, and unlike their counterparts in Delhi, few Bengalis cast the blame for this trend on Bangladesh. Rather, they ascribed it to a Pakistan-based effort to create an eastern front in what they labeled as ISI's proxy war against India. A liberal Muslim intellectual, for instance, described vividly his travels to border-belt villages where "ignorant mullahs" crossing over from Bangladesh spread a message of jihad and hatred that defies the tolerant traditions of Islam as practiced in eastern India. Another Muslim leader claimed that, in addition to some 450 "registered" madrassas, West Bengal is seeing a proliferation of unregistered facilities that do not have the broad curriculum of state-supported schools. Likewise, Congress politicians, who are otherwise focused on the thuggish practices of the ruling Communists, expressed concern about an undercurrent of fundamentalism spilling over from the border to radicalize their Muslim vote bank. Calcutta's leading publisher claimed that when he talks to Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, the West Bengal Chief Minister states that the only threats he faces are "the ISI and CITU" (the leftist national labor federation).

¶3. (C) Comment: These are only impressions, and we do not rule out that much of this anxiety about ISI reflects a generalized atmosphere of conspiracy in which ISI has replaced the American CIA as the fountainhead of everything bad that happens in eastern India. It is notable that these concerns are echoed here in Delhi by Ajai Sahni, editor of the respected South Asian Terrorist Portal, who claims that ISI is actively targeting migrant Muslim populations in border districts of West Bengal. This tactic, he asserts, is aimed at creating a base to be mobilized in the future and facilitating the movement of terrorists and weapons through the honeycombs of Calcutta and West Bengal. We will not be surprised to see this issue getting more attention as West Bengal heads toward elections in spring 2006 and will also seek to address it through our C/T reporting.

BLAKE